

Civil Rights Committee Meeting Minutes July 29, 2003

Meeting took place at the Redmond field office conference room.

NRCS Committee members present: Gina Kerzman, Michelle Richwine, Loren Unruh, Lee Ko, Mary Beth Smith, Cory Owens, Gary Briggs.

FSA Committee members present: Harvey Bush, Janice Knutz.

Topic: Review and changing of By-laws

Gina presented a draft copy of the new bylaws to the civil rights committee. Prior to this meeting, the committee operated without bylaws. The draft copy did not include the Farm Service Agency committee members. The committee went through the bylaws and made necessary changes. Gina will type up the changes and distribute the bylaws to all committee members, and submit them to Bob Graham, State Conservationist, and Larry Frey, State Executive Director, for their approval.

During the discussion of the bylaws, it was decided that there will be a committee chair and vice chair. One of which must be an NRCS employee and one must be an FSA employee. At the present time, Gina Kerzman (NRCS) is the chair. Harvey Bush (FSA) was elected as the Vice chair. A suggestion was made to ask Denise Troxell to serve as secretary. Gina said she would discuss this with Denise.

The committee also discussed the need for advisors that represented both the FSA and NRCS. Several of the NRCS advisors have left Oregon or retired. The committee suggested the following individuals serve as advisors:

Dianne Guidry, Partnership Liaison, NRCS

Meta Boyer, State Information Officer, NRCS

Assistant State Conservationist for Operations, NRCS (position currently vacant)

Tom Makowski, Sociologist, NRCS (already an advisory)

Roger Tresham, Administrative Officer, FSA

Marjory Crooker, Outreach Coordinator, FSA

Erica Szlosek, Public Affairs Specialist, FSA (in California)

Gina and Harvey will ask the appropriate individuals to serve as advisors.

Topic: Committee Action Plan

The committee reviewed and updated the action plan. Gina will make changes and distribute to the committee members, the state conservationist, and the state executive director. Several items were added, some checked off as accomplished and others edited.

A list of the added topics follows:

1. Compile outreach packets for recruitment efforts.
2. Meet face-to-face once a year with the Agriculture Council at OSU to discuss careers with NRCS and FSA.

3. Explore and share new and existing recruitment networks between NRCS and FSA.
4. Annually review civil rights review procedure, and give feedback at civil rights meetings on trends we have identified during civil rights reviews.
5. Revamp civil rights binders to be more useful to field offices. Include a “How to use the civil rights binder” fact sheet, a new table of contents, and an index for reference materials.

Other discussions included adding Linda Weiler, Special Emphasis Program Manager for FSA, to the NRCS SEPM distribution lists to share information. (Note: The week after the meeting, Linda Weiler was added as a committee member. She will receive all information as a committee member from now on.)

One of the existing action items refers to conducting exit interviews with individuals who leave Oregon NRCS, or leave NRCS completely. Lee Ko and Gina Kerzman are listed as the individuals responsible for this action item. Lee offered to conduct a review with one employee, but the individual declined. Gina encouraged others on the civil rights committee to offer to conduct exit interviews for individuals leaving their basin. Harvey Bush suggested that FSA look into conducting similar reviews. This was added to the action plan.

Cory informed the committee that OSU has a group called the Agriculture Council that meets monthly on campus. The council is made up of all the agriculture related clubs and organizations at OSU. The clubs are required to send a representative to all the ag council meetings. Cory suggested we make a yearly presentation to the council as a recruiting tool. Lee Ko and Janice Knutz agreed to arrange a meeting with the council. Cory said she would find the information on the council and email it to the committee members.

Another action item that generated discussion was to “Promote and assist Craig Schellsmidt in holding Conservation Workshops statewide.” Bob Graham asked Gina at the last leadership team meeting to discuss Craig’s workshops with the civil rights committee, and see if we found them valuable. Craig has vacated the position and Bob wanted feed back from the committee on whether NRCS should continue to support these workshops. Committee members commented that the workshops have been helpful, but at times increased the field office workload. Lee Ko reiterated that there is a need for the workshops to help the small acreage landowners, however it needs to be more clear up front what NRCS’ obligations are afterwards. Committee members also said that the workshops need to be very focused on needs in particular areas, and that they should increase our efficiency rather than burden our field offices with more demands on their limited time. Gina said she would share this input with Bob Graham.

The committee also discussed generating reports on minority landowners. Janice mentioned that the new SCIMS system should provide such reports. However, no one in the group knew how. Harvey was going to work with Tony Meeuwesen from FSA to find out how to get the information out of SCIMS. Gina said she would work with Danny Burgett in the NRCS state office. The discussion led to questions about how accurate the

information is since field office staff have to guess what race their clients are. One committee member recounted a situation where they guessed wrong and the customer actually saw the paperwork that had him listed by race. He was very upset that he was placed in the wrong race category, and that he was identified by race at all. Janice mentioned that SCIMS has a form that customers fill out that asks their race. Gina mentioned that she was told we weren't supposed to use any forms that asked the customers race. Gina said she would look into the matter and find out about the form.

Topic: Outreach Plan

Gina asked the committee to reviewed and comment on the NRCS Oregon Outreach Plan. The committee made several helpful suggestions. The outreach plan will be carried out by NRCS individuals in key leadership positions.

Topic: New Website

Gina distributed a print out of the new NRCS website that included a link to Civil Rights. The link jumps to a page that outlines the committee members, its functions and responsibilities, NRCS National Civil Rights policies and procedures, NRCS Oregon language interpreters, special emphasis program managers, special emphasis on observances, the civil rights action plan, the committee's poster and the committee's bylaws. Gina asked for ideas from the committee. Mary Beth Smith suggested adding a link to the following items:

1. The most up-to-date non-discrimination statement,
2. The Oregon NRCS Sexual Harassment Policy
3. The Oregon NRCS Civil Rights Policy

The FSA committee members were not included on the website. Gina asked their permission to list their names and phone numbers. They concurred.

Committee members suggested some other possible names for inclusion on the language interpreters' page. Harvey was going to check with three FSA individuals to see if they would mind being listed. (Harvey checked during a break at the meeting, and the individuals declined.) Someone also suggested that CiCi Brooks, range conservationist in John Day, might be able to assist in interpreting Spanish. Gina said she would follow up with CiCi. The current interpreters listed are Misty Falcon in the state office and Kate Danks in the Newport field office.

FSA requested that the CR committee poster be emailed to Marjorie Crooker in the FSA state office for them to post on their website. Lee Ko said she would send it when she got back to her office.

Topic: Proposal for Hosting National Organization of Professional Hispanic NRCS Employees Annual Conference

Hispanic Special Emphasis Program Manager, Michelle Richwine, discussed the possibility of hosting the NOPHNRCSE next year in Portland, Oregon. She is currently writing the proposal, which will be submitted by Bob Graham to the NOPHNRCSE

President, Pedro Ramos. Michelle said that if Oregon hosts the meeting, she would like some help from the committee in coordinating the conference. Gina volunteered to help.

Michelle mentioned that FSA was invited to participate in the conference if it were in Oregon. She said she would send out the website for FSA to get more information. There would also be a portion of the agenda devoted to civil rights committees. Our committee would be invited to attend as well.

Topic: Civil Rights Binder

The committee discussed the need to revamp the civil rights binder to make it more user friendly. Gina has already rearranged the binder in the Pendleton field office and typed up a new table of contents, which she distributed to the group. Cory said she also revised the Tillamook binder. In order to help members revise binders, Gina also handed out a copy of the new table of contents with notes on where the items could be found in the old binder. Cory also typed up instructions on how to use the binder, which she agreed to distribute to the committee via email. Gina is also looking into having binder tabs printed up with the name of the sections on the tabs rather than just numbers.

Mary Beth suggested that we let the DC's rearrange their own binders instead of sending new ones out. The committee agreed.

It was noted that the Forest Grove RC&D, the Hood River RC&D and the PMC do not have civil rights binders. FSA would also like a copy of the binder to possibly incorporate into their agency. Gina said she would create four new binders when the old binders had been completely revised.

Topic: National Civil Rights Review

The committee discussed the up coming national civil rights review. Denise Troxell has worked with the Salem and Tangent field offices to prepare. Mary Beth Smith will be traveling to Medford and Grants Pass next week to help them prepare. Gina has visited the state office twice to help them prepare and get their records in order. Gina passed out the SEPM questions that may be asked during their interviews. Gina recommended that the SEPMs have documentation of their efforts as well as the addendums to their position descriptions. Michelle commented that she did not have an addendum. Gina said she would email one when she got back to the office. The committee also discussed the 29 CFR Part 1614, and Gina reminded the committee that it was the EEOC policies outlining Equal Employment Opportunity in the federal government. Gina also recommended that committee members reread the 230 section of the General Manual just to brush up on NRCS' civil rights policies.

FSA recently went through a national review and gave the committee a few words of wisdom. Harvey recommended that we make sure that employees know who the SEPMs were in the state. He said that documentation of civil rights efforts was very important.

Topic: Civil Rights Review Assignments for FY04

Gina mentioned that some of the letters that accompanied the civil rights review reports had a line that said, "If you have questions, contact Gina Kerzman." Gina said that this was part of the form letter that she sent out, but that part was suppose to have the reviewer's name. For instance, if Michelle did a review, it should say, "If you have questions, contact Michelle Richwine.) Gina also reminded the committee to make sure that when they do reviews that their reports have all the right names and places. Using the standard template saves the reviewer time, but she said to make sure that everything that needed to be changed, such as the name of the field office, the individuals on the CC list, and the basin team leaders name should all be replaced each time. She reminded the group to read through the report and check for errors before sending out so that it will be professional looking.

Close outs and agreed to items: All but one review is closed out this fiscal year. The Heppner review had one agreed-to item that they need to respond to. All other agreed-to items from other reviews have been completed.

The committee looked at the five-year schedule of civil rights reviews and determined who would conduct what reviews in FY04. The following assignments were made:

St. Helens field office: Lee Ko and Mary Beth Smith
Tillamook field office: Michelle Richwine and Lee Ko
Salem field office: Gina Kerzman and Connie Holmquist
Dallas field office: Gina Kerzman and Connie Holmquist
Northwest Oregon RC&D: Mary Beth Smith and Loren Unruh
Portland field office: Michelle Richwine and Denise Troxell
McMinnville field office: Denise Troxell and Gary Briggs

NOTE: Loren Unruh has offered to fill in for anyone who is unable to attend a civil rights review or who wishes to reduce their number of reviews.

Gina informed the committee that at the last leadership team meeting, Bob Graham made a statement about 504 reviews (accessibility). Bob said that the FAC committee had discussed the issue of all three agencies (NRCS, FSA and RD) all doing the same 504 review of the same office buildings. The FAC decided that in the service centers where all three agencies were present, RD would be responsible for the 504 reviews. Harvey Bush suggested that we coordinate our review schedules with RD and see if we are reviewing the same offices in the same year. FSA reviews one-third of their offices every year, which means every office is reviewed once every three years. The NRCS just switched to a five year rotation on reviewing offices. Gina and Harvey agreed to look at coordinating review schedules.

It was suggested that someone work with the new Hood River field office to help Carly Heron get up to date with civil rights requirements. Gina said she has already been working with Carly on getting the right posters, policies, etc posted.

Topic: New Federal Women Program Manager

The state conservationist just appointed a new Federal Women's Program Manager. Connie Holmquist, out of the Heppner field office, accepted the appointment this month and will be present at the national review on August 11. She was unable to attend this meeting due to short notice.

Topic: Reasonable Accommodations

Loren Unruh, Disabilities Program Manager, gave a short presentation on the requirements for reasonable accommodation. He passed out the portion of the general manual that covered this topic.

Topic: Meeting Schedule for FY04

The committee set tentative dates for the FY04 meetings. They are as follows:

November 4, Redmond field office, 8:00 am – 2:00 pm

February 3, Redmond field office, 8:00 am – 2:00 pm

May 4, Teleconference, 9:00 am – 11:00 am

August 3, Teleconference, 9:00 am – 11:00 am

Meeting adjourned.